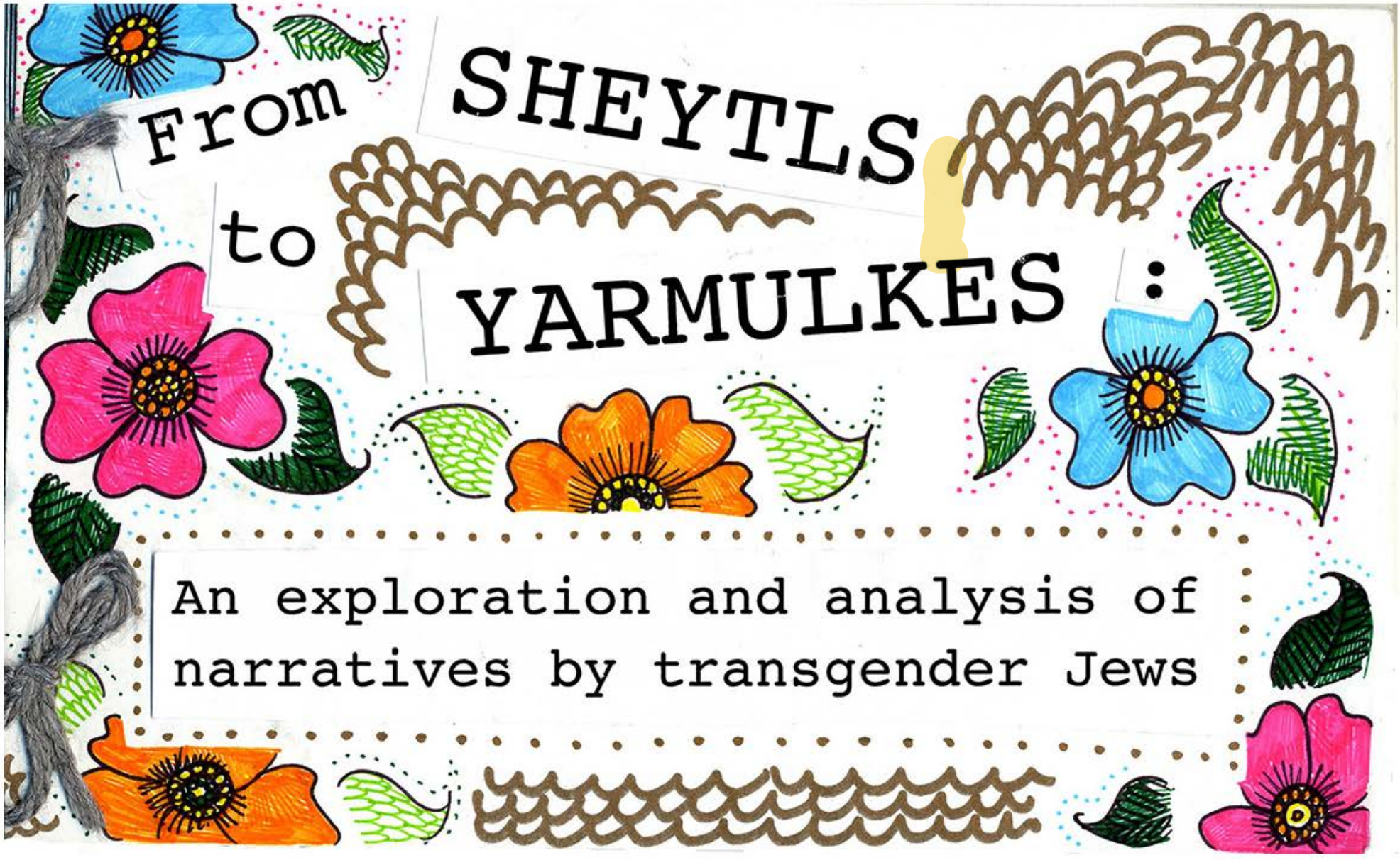

From SHEYTLS
to YARMULKES :
An exploration and analysis of
narratives by transgender Jews

Dear reader,

This zine is about the unique experiences of transgender Jews, examined through personal narratives that explore the idea of gender and sexuality among different sects of Judaism. Through this artistic portrayal of these narratives, I hope to analyze the unique difficulties and challenges transgender Jews face as their religious and gender identities collide. By examining these stories, I have found that traditional Jewish practices and obligations further restrict gender exploration, and cause transgender Jews to feel increased discomfort and dysphoria.

That being said, as a heterosexual, cis-gendered Jewish woman, I'm examining these texts from an outside perspective. While attempting to remain as respectful and informative as possible, I'm also trying not to homogenize the stories of these individuals, and instead share the unique experiences of devout Jews transitioning between genders. All of the information I'm using comes directly from articles and personal narratives written by transgender Jews about their transition. As a Jew myself, I'm aware of the variety of practices and tradition for different sects of the Jewish religion. This zine looks at the specific aspects of Judaism described by the narratives, understanding that different people observe and celebrate differently.

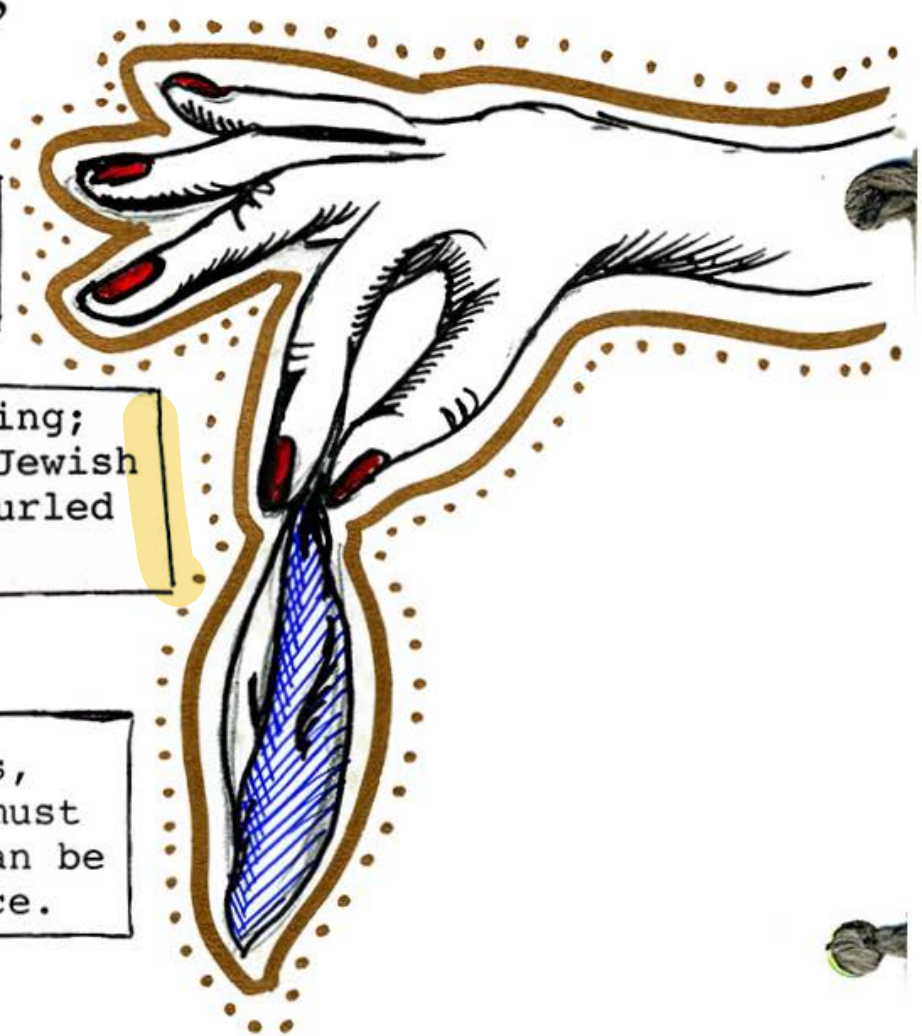
Cole Krawitz

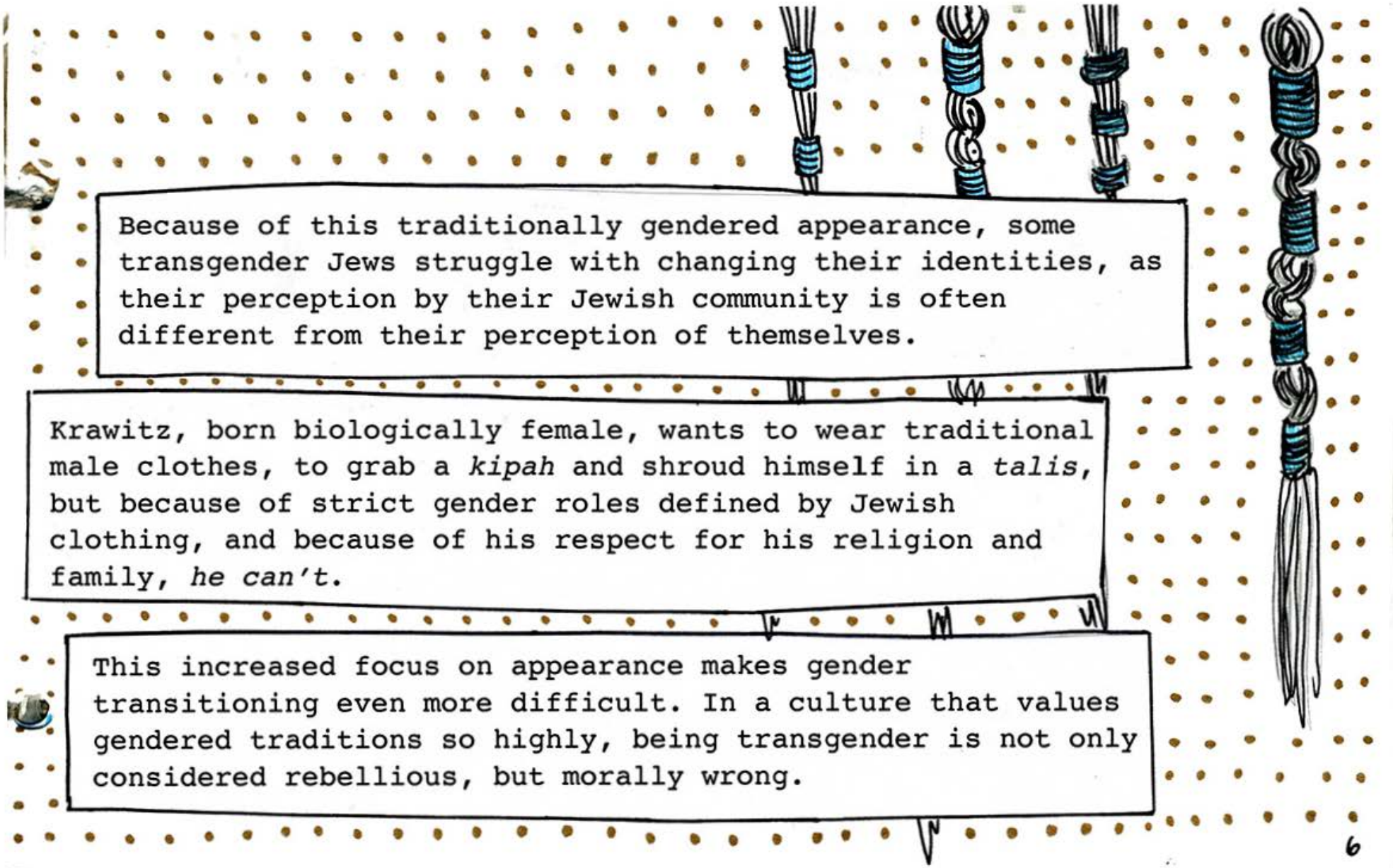
"You need to put this on, Sir"

Within Conservative Judaism, appearance and clothing are very gendered.

Boys/men must wear *kippot*, a head covering; *tzitzit*, tassels worn as a reminder of Jewish obligations; and often have *payot*, or curled sidelocks.

Women, on the other hand, must wear wigs, or *sheytls*, to represent fidelity, and must wear long skirts. None of their skin can be uncovered except for their hands and face.




Because of this traditionally gendered appearance, some transgender Jews struggle with changing their identities, as their perception by their Jewish community is often different from their perception of themselves.
Krawitz, born biologically female, wants to wear traditional male clothes, to grab a *kipah* and shroud himself in a *talis*, but because of strict gender roles defined by Jewish clothing, and because of his respect for his religion and family, *he can't*.
This increased focus on appearance makes gender transitioning even more difficult. In a culture that values gendered traditions so highly, being transgender is not only considered rebellious, but morally wrong.

Because of this public identity struggle for people like Krawitz, being transgender within the Jewish community is extremely difficult to manage and present.

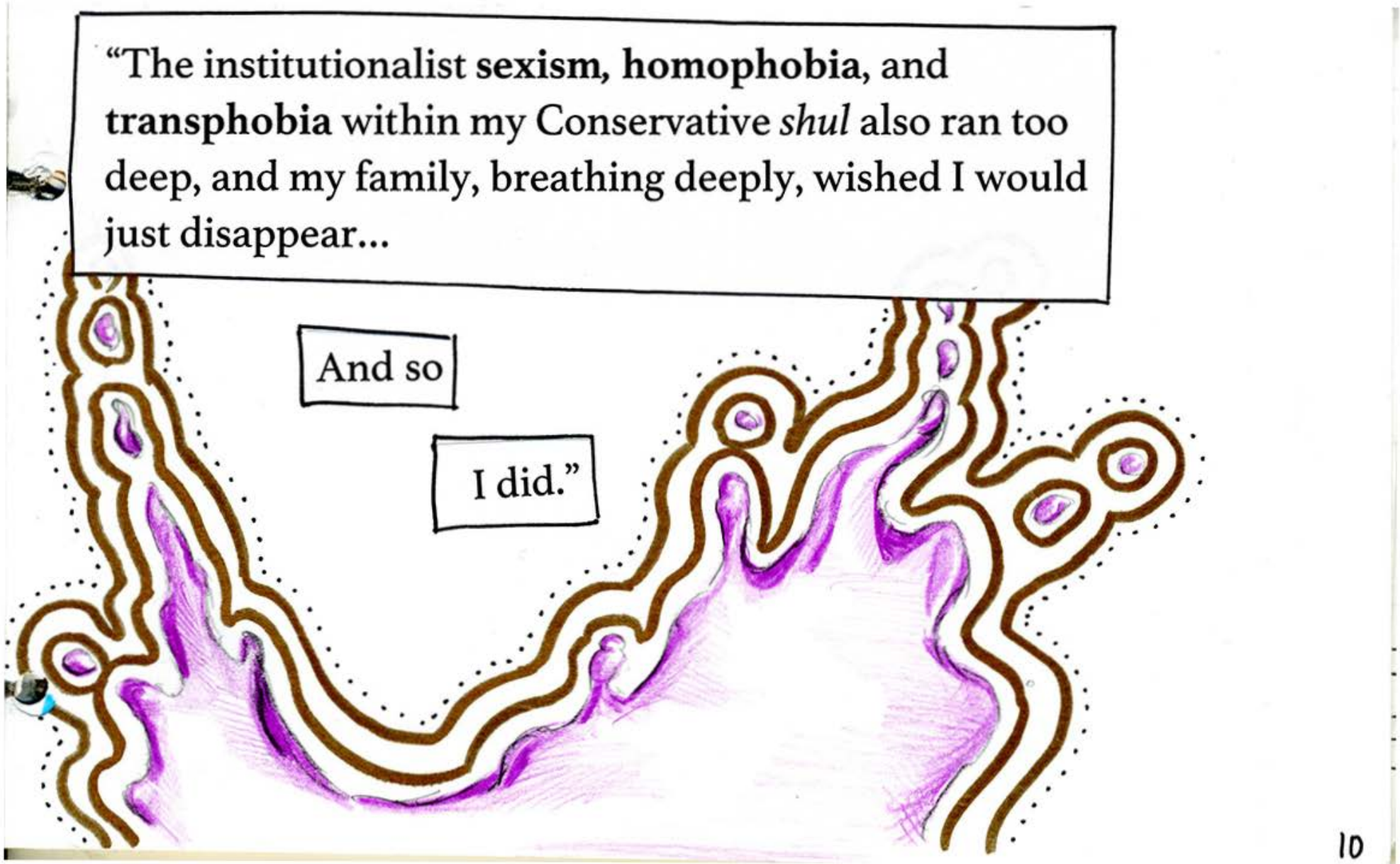
"Yet I still don't know how to make sense of the clash of identities, politics, family, self, empowerment, and self-determination within the halls of *Hashem*"

In Krawitz's practice of Jewish Conservatism, restricted to a traditional and patriarchal model, there is little to no room for gender variance.

The definition of a Jewish family structure does not include transgender members.

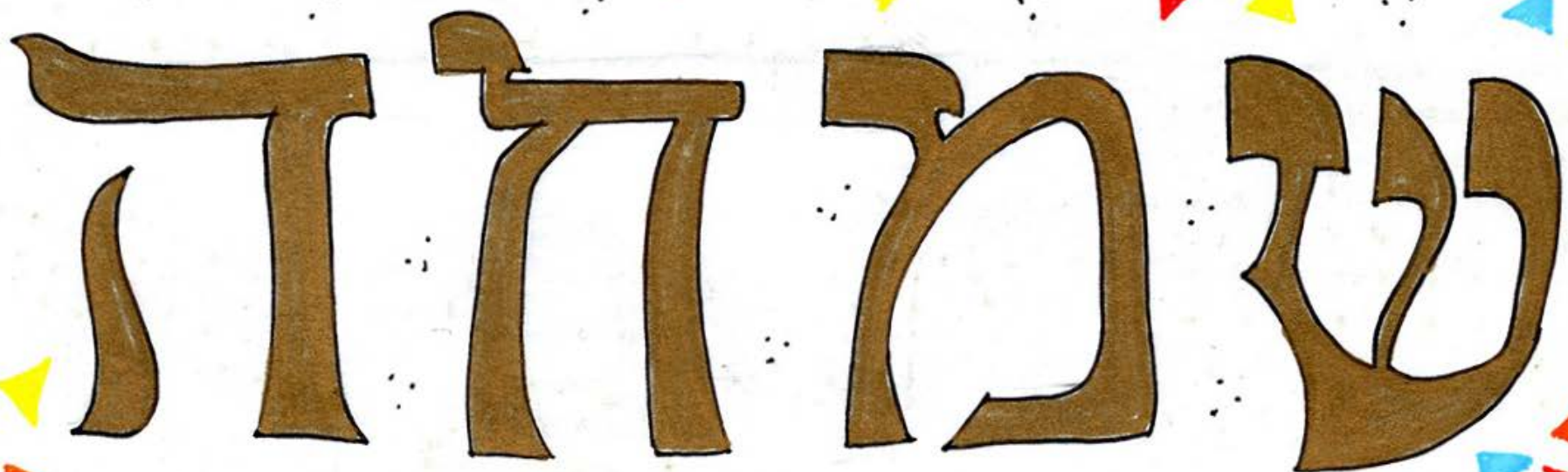
Jewish traditions don't allow for gender ambiguity.

Krawtiz remembers attending a traditional Jewish wedding as a defining moment for him. He cried at the ceremony, as he watched his Jewish community welcome the traditional couple with open arms. He cried because his parents' vision of his future, the tradition and Conservative observance they had imposed on him, no longer made sense in a world where he was truly himself.


"The institutionalist **sexism, homophobia**, and **transphobia** within my Conservative *shul* also ran too deep, and my family, breathing deeply, wished I would just disappear...
And so
I did."

זר בדת משה וישראל... ברוך אתה יהיה אלהינו מלך...

Joy Ladin



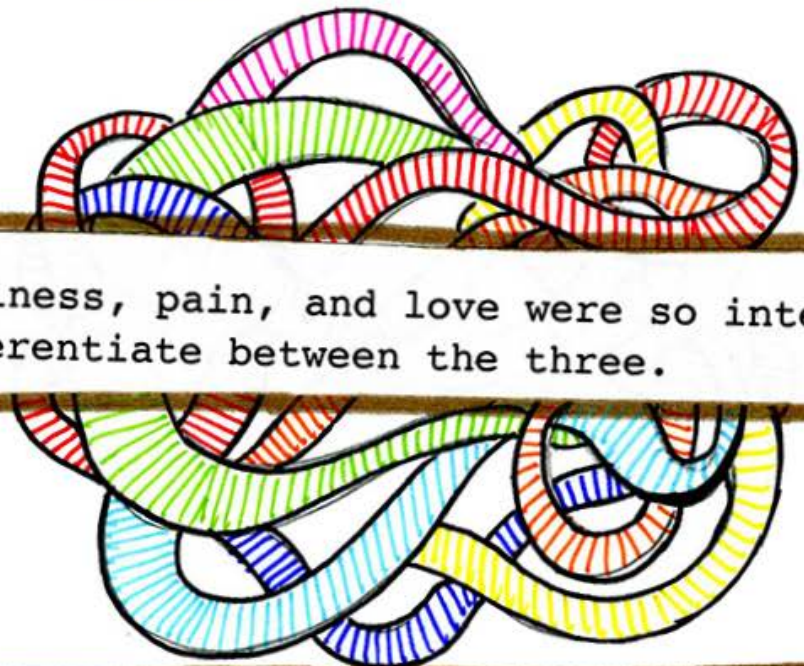
Joy Ladin has become a figurehead of the Jewish transgender community. As an Orthodox trans woman, her story of becoming the first openly trans professor at a Jewish institution has become an inspiration to many.

After growing up as an observant Orthodox Jewish boy, Ladin attended Sarah Lawrence College, where he met his wife. Ladin and his wife had three children, and he became a tenured professor at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University.

While Ladin tried to tell his wife about his feelings of gender dysphoria, she *rejected* them.

"I spent so much of my life as a ghost, haunting a body that didn't feel like mine"

He started counting down the days until his life insurance activated, so he could *kill himself*.



Happiness, pain, and love were so intertwined, he couldn't differentiate between the three.

Ladin became so overwhelmingly consumed by his changing gender identity, and before the two years of waiting for suicide passed, he decided to transition. *He needed to.*

Ladin transitioned; she started going by female pronouns, wore skirts and makeup, and grew out her hair. After becoming a tenured professor, she informed the Yeshiva about her transition. Their response:

You can still work here and get paid, but you can't set ***foot*** *on campus.*

After taking legal action against the Yeshiva, Ladin forced the Orthodox institution to let her work on campus, and to accept an openly transgender employee for the first time in history.

Coming back to the Yeshiva, Ladin was nervous that she would be rejected by her students and questioned by her colleagues.

"Yet everyone has more important things to do than think about my gender." No one called her out, and no one seemed to care.

...or so she thought.

YE-SHE-VA

(actual title of the article)

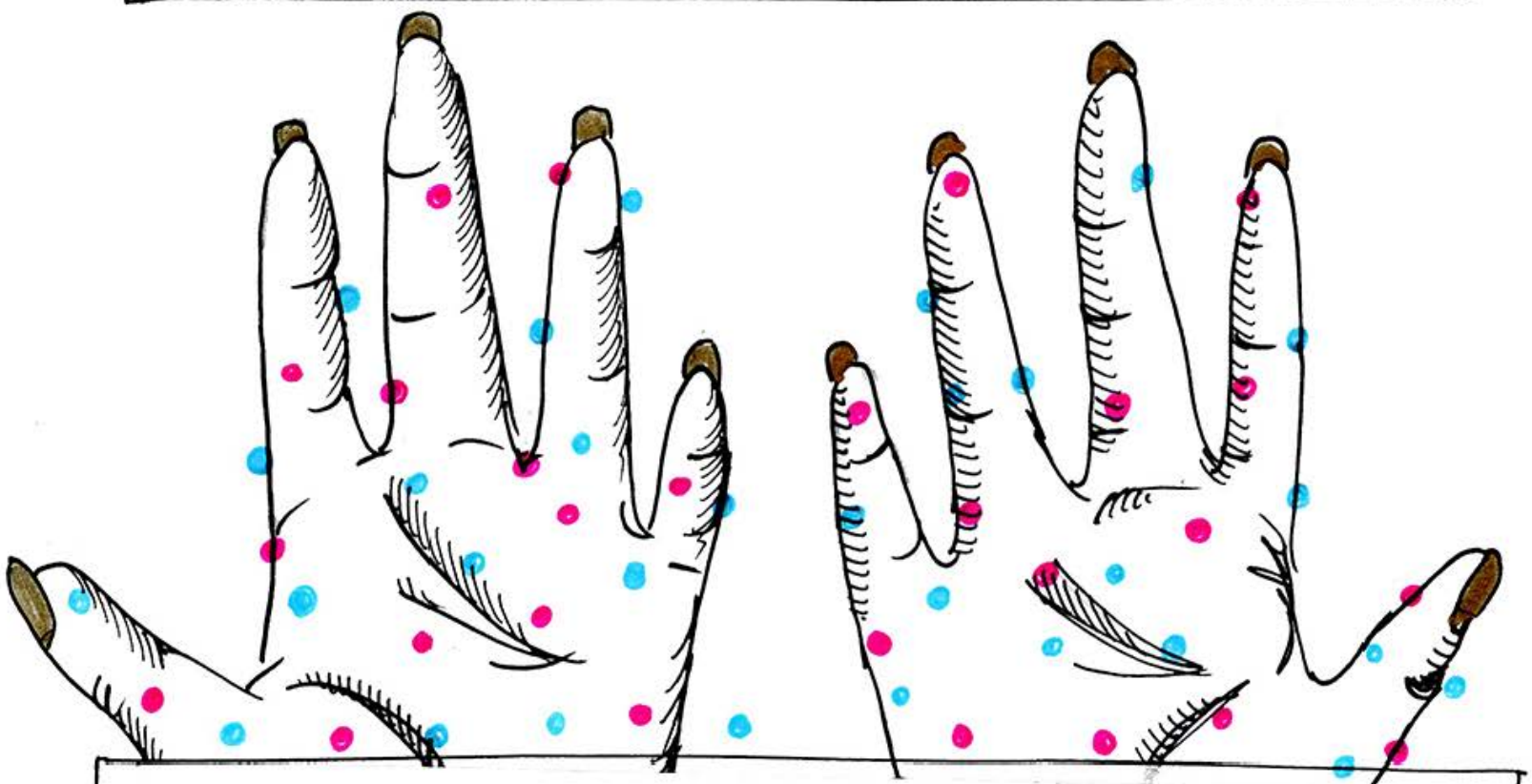
While at school, no one questioned or even gave thought to her gender identity. Yet once *The New York Post* got a hold of the story, she became a media sensation of religious deviance – she became a *spectacle*.

Being a transgender professor wasn't what made the headline so sensational to the public – it was the combination of transsexualism (freedom of identity) and Orthodox Judaism (restriction of identity by divine law).

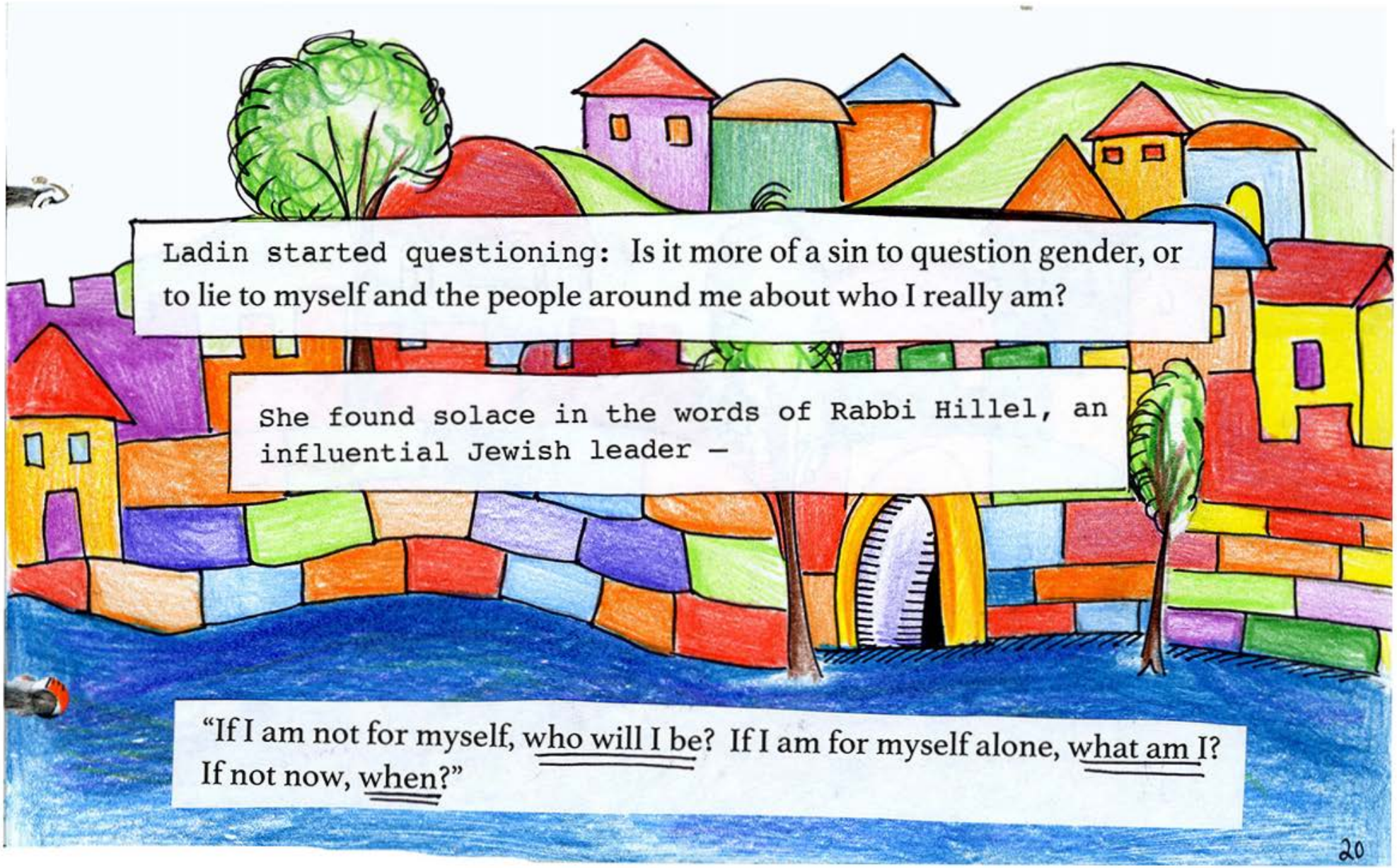
One Rabbi even said to her:

"There's just no leeway in Jewish law for a transsexual"

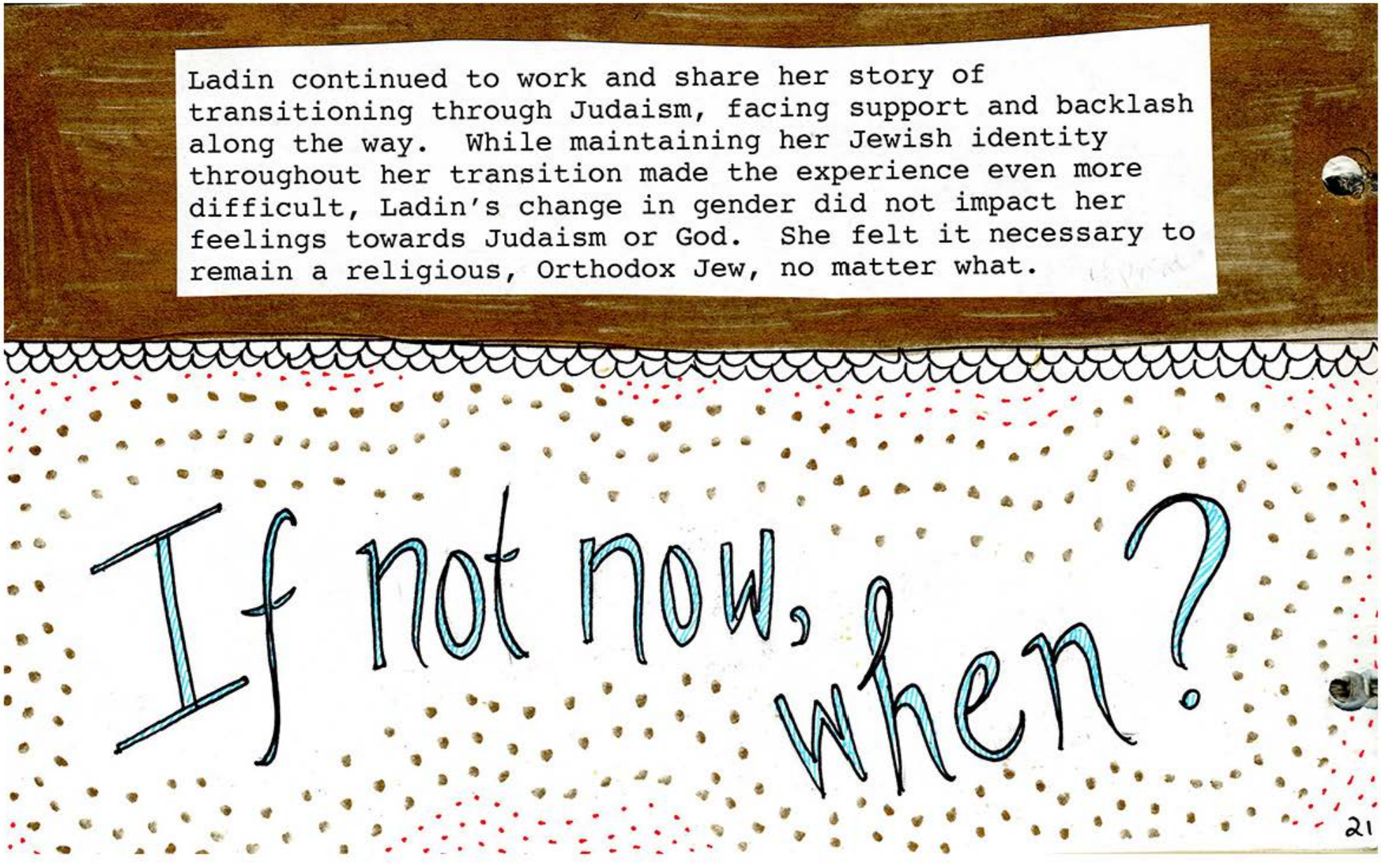
"When observant Jewish men and women meet me, are they allowed to shake my hand?"



Ladin started questioning her role in Judaism, after the article was published, and how she could appropriately present herself within the religious community she so desired to be a part of.


Ladin started questioning: Is it more of a sin to question gender, or to lie to myself and the people around me about who I really am?
She found solace in the words of Rabbi Hillel, an influential Jewish leader –
"If I am not for myself, who will I be? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?"

Ladin continued to work and share her story of transitioning through Judaism, facing support and backlash along the way. While maintaining her Jewish identity throughout her transition made the experience even more difficult, Ladin's change in gender did not impact her feelings towards Judaism or God. She felt it necessary to remain a religious, Orthodox Jew, no matter what.



In the Jewish Talmud, there are six described genders, each with their own contrasting dichotomies:

- Male vs. female
  - Defined by genitals and reproductive abilities; most commonly used identifications.
- *Saris* (infertile man) vs. *ailonit* (infertile woman)
  - Defined by ability to reproduce; follows theme of classification by reproductive abilities.

- *Androgynos* vs. *tumtum*

- *Androgynos* is defined by having both primary sex organs, while *tumtum* is having neither visible sex organ.

- *Tumtum* is treated as a not-yet sexed person, as someone whose organs may eventually appear or be uncovered surgically. Yet they are also considered less holy because if they turn out to be a man with a penis, they will be uncircumcised, which is a sin.

Thus, the Jewish religion has some acknowledgement of gender variance, but that acknowledgement often does not translate into acceptance and growth for the community.

Reuben Zellman

Zellman, a FTM transgender Rabbi, spends his time researching the term *tumtum*, along with the other classifications for gender in Jewish texts.

As Zellman was becoming a Rabbi, he spent a lot of time contemplating his sense of self, and how he wanted to present himself to the world and his Jewish community. This internal conversation led to his undeniable belief that transitioning was the right answer to his questions.

Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam Ha'Mavir L'Ovrim

Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of Time and Space, the Transforming One to those who transform/transition/cross over

Blessing:

Berachot 54a asks: "*Anisa d'rabim m'barchinan, anisa d'yahid m*

only say bles

the waters o

all individu

who can rec

Baruch Ata

la'zman hazeh

Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God Ruler of Time and Space who has kept us alive and sustained us and helped us to arrive at this moment

Baruch Ata

B'shem mitzvat tzitzit v'mitzvat hityatzrut

Blessed are Y

in God's ima

For the sake of the mitzvah of ritual fringes and the mitzvah of self-formation.

'barchinan?" – "Do we
acles?" We answer: like
'e keenly feel the loss of
ıber of our community

God, Ruler o

the Shehechiya

Sh'hechanu, v'kimanu, v'higiyanu,

Masculine God language:
Baruch atah adonay, eloheinu,

lech Ha'Olam sh'asani b'tzelmo

One, our God Ruler of Time and Spac

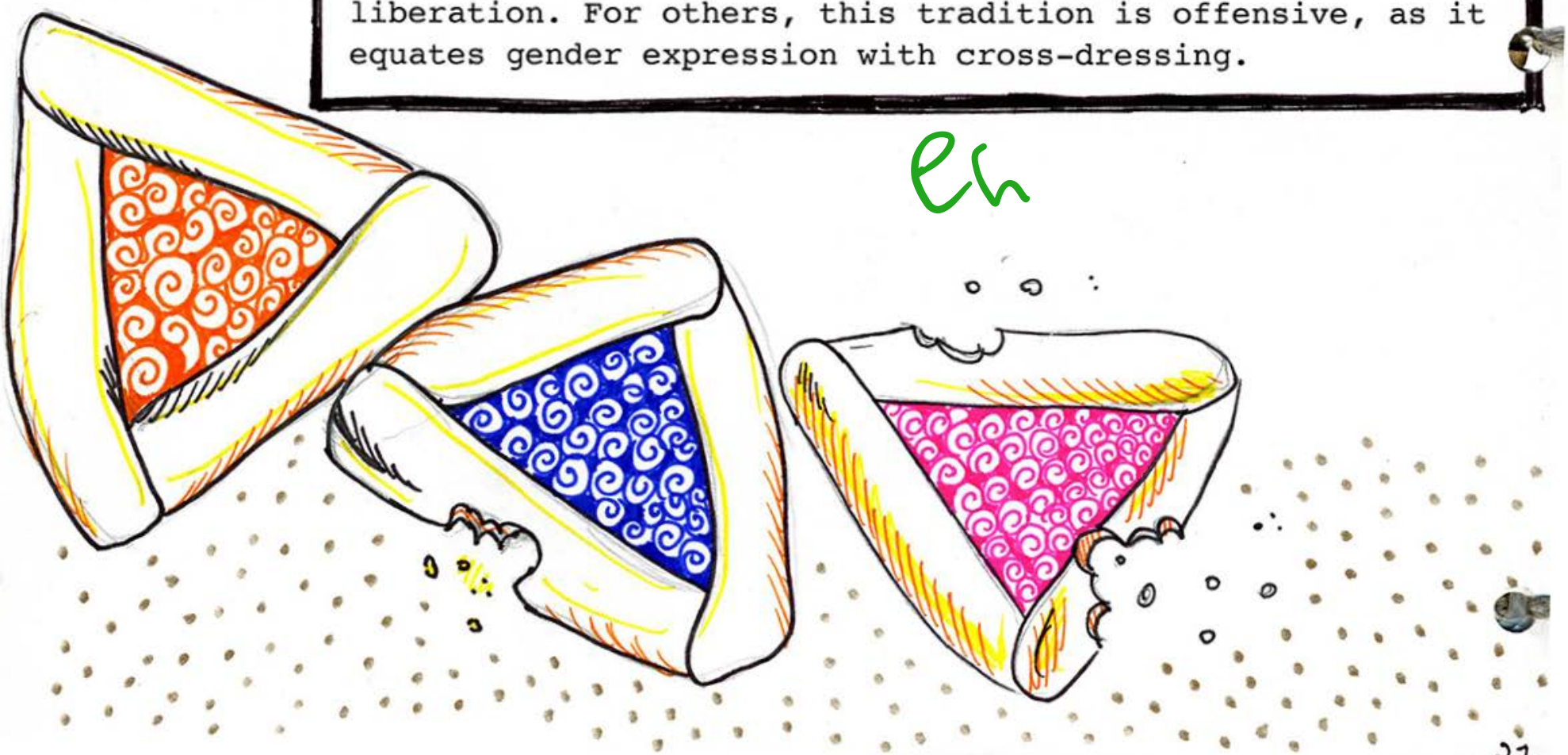
Zellman, along with another transgender Rabbi, created transtorah.org, an online resource for transgender Jews.

The website includes blessings for transitioning, chest bindings, and sexual reassignment surgeries.

Emily Aviva Kapor

As the first trans female Rabbi, Kapor talks about the important of Purim in allowing her and other Jews to experiment with gender appearances.

This traditional Jewish holiday, similar to Halloween, encourages kids to pretend to be someone or something else, which often means dressing up as different genders. For some, this is an experience of discovery and gender liberation. For others, this tradition is offensive, as it equates gender expression with cross-dressing.



Kapor has her own blog where she explores the concept of transsexualism in a Jewish context.

She questions, "Isn't circumcision a way of perfecting the penis with surgery?" How is that any different than gender reassignment surgeries?

According to Kapor, God must have acknowledged that medical intervention may be necessary to achieve one's true identity.

No

בזק ישראל

While these stories and narratives have been important platforms and resources for trans Jews across many sects of Judaism, the treatment of trans Jews has not improved for several years. Krawitz talks about a movement within his synagogue to openly accept lesbian and gay members, but *not* trans individuals. Organizations have been established to pressure Jewish institutions to include more members of the LGBTQ community, but as Krawitz emphasizes, the "T" population tends to get overlooked.

Through these narratives, it's evident that religious Judaism often doesn't foster or encourage non-binary gender expression.

Clothing, traditions, and holidays all have gendered qualities, which can spark gender curiosity. Yet, at the same time, these customs serve as restrictive roles for men and women to fill, suppressing any and all curiosity and deeming it sinful.

While religious trans Jews face increased challenges as their gender and religious identities seem to contrast one another, many also experience great empowerment from this combination. Being able to wear *kippot* or teach at a Yeshiva in a pair of heels has made many trans Jews feel fulfilled, and as if they finally achieved their true identities both physically and spiritually.

Through analyzing these stories, I was able to discover the many similarities and differences between the challenges that trans Jews face when compared to other trans communities. Trans Jews often struggle with religious pressures to conform to gendered clothing and, depending on the sect od Judaism, be separated by gender during times of worship. Yet many of these issues are shared with other trans communities, as clothing is often gendered in society at large.

As a Reconstructionist Jew myself, my sect of Judaism is considered more progressive and accepting of the LGBTQ community. Anyone is welcome to wear *kippot* or *tallit*, and men and women sit beside each other in synagogue. There are male and female Rabbis in my *shul*, and there are no religious restrictions based on gender. I am lucky to be a part of this community, where I have not faced specific challenges for my gender identity.

all drawings & artwork by Sammi Siegel

narratives & stories by

Cole Krawitz
Jay Ladin
Reuben Zellman
Emily Aviva Kapor
Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert

help during research

make space for non male and female gender expression

medium: index cards, pens, colored pencils, & collages

Reference Sheet

- Kipot / kipah: head covering, traditionally worn by men.
- talis / talit: shoulder shroud worn by men during prayer.
- shul: synonym of synagogue.
- Purim: traditional Jewish holiday celebrated with costumes and desserts.
- Rabbi: Jewish religious leader
- Yeshiva: Jewish institution of studies
- Torah: Jewish religious text (same for Talmud)

4/7/2015

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